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ABSTRACT

A study determined the relationships among intergenerational communication competence, communicative flexibility, and rhetorical sensitivity and whether there are differences among gender groups, age groups, and class groups in rating these dependent measures. Subjects, 78 students enrolled in one of 6 sections of an upper-division undergraduate interviewing course at a large Midwestern university, completed 3 self-report measures. Results indicated significant relationships among all variables. In addition, significant differences occurred between gender groups and between age groups in rating the communication flexibility variable. Results also indicated that extension students were rhetorically sensitive, more flexible, and perceived greater communication competence, as well as being rated more positively by their interviewers than day students. (Contains 16 references and 6 tables of data. Appendices present the 3 self-report measures.) (Author/RS)

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An Exploratory Study of Interpersonal Communication Competence: Assessing Performance in Selection Interviews of Day and Extension Students

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Abstract

This study is designed to determine the relationships among interpersonal communication competence, communicative flexibility, and rhetorical sensitivity and to determine if there are differences between gender groups, age groups, and class groups in rating these dependent measures. The results indicate that there are significant relationships among all variables. In addition, significant differences occurred between gender groups and between age groups in rating the communication flexibility variable. Other results are discussed in the paper.

Spano and Zimmerman (1995) indicate that interpersonal contexts vary in terms of goals and purposes, but few studies examine the ways in which competence operates within specified contextual boundaries. This study is designed to determine the extent to which interpersonal communication competence dispositions predict situated outcomes of job applicants in the selection interview.

The present study is designed to determine the relationships among interpersonal communication competence, communicative flexibility, and rhetorical sensitivity, as well as to determine if there are differences between gender groups, age groups, and class groups in rating rhetorical sensitivity, communication flexibility, and interpersonal communication competence variables.

Communication Competence

Wiemann (1977, 198) defined communication competence as follows: "as the ability of an interactant to choice among available communicative behaviors in order that he may successfully accomplish his own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation."

He concluded that the competent communicator can be described as empathic, affiliative, supportive, and relaxed while interacting and is capable of adapting behavior to various situations when moving from one situation to another. Furthermore, Spano and Zimmerman (1995) asserted that the competent communicator must possess sufficient levels of communication knowledge, have the

ability to display that knowledge in on-going interaction situations, and be motivated to do so.

Other research by Spitzburg (1991) and Spitzburg and Brunner (1991) explored the relationships between competence traits and more contextually-specific judgments of competence. The trait approach suggests that individuals have predispositions or tendencies toward communication that suggest competence across situations and contexts.

Previous research by Spitzberg and Cupach (1989) have emphasized traits and individual difference approaches. However, in this study, as in Spano and Zimmerman's (1995) study, interpersonal communication competence is conceptualized as a general trait-like quality. Communication flexibility and rhetorical sensitivity, two other related communication dispositions, are examined. They were selected because they reflect specific theoretical dimensions associated with interpersonal context.

Communication Flexibility

Ruben (1976) described flexibility as an ability to react to new and ambiguous situations with a limited amount of visible discomfortable. Hart et al. (1980) indicate that interpersonal flexibility is a rhetorical property, an avoidance of communicative rigidity, and a tolerance for inventional searching. Delia et al. (1982) conceptual flexibility as constructivist theory which relates to how

people interpret social situations and form impressions of others. Spano (1992, 100) defined communication flexibility as "the ability to adapt and create appropriate and effective communication message behaviors and strategies to interaction situations."

Rhetorical Sensitivity

Hart and Burks (1972) indicated that rhetorical sensitivity (RS) is a cognitive orientation to communication competence which stresses the importance of appropriate adaptation and flexibility in interpersonal communication interactions. The rhetorical sensitive person tries to accept role-taking as part of the human condition, attempts to avoid stylized verbal behavior, is characteristically willing to undergo the strain of adaptation, seeks to distinguish between all information acceptable for communication, and tries to understand that an idea can be rendered in multiform. They theorized that learning to adopt communication behavior to a specific situation with others is a significant part of the social enculturation process.

Other research by Hart et al. (1980) and Eadie and Powell (1991) support these findings. In addition, research, according to Littlejohn (1992) indicated that individuals who score high on rhetorical sensitivity avoid communication rigidity, accept personal complexity, appreciate the communication of ideas, and accept creativity.

The Selection Interview Context

Regan (1983) indicates that the selection interview is actually an applied interpersonal communication context. In this study all students had completed a unit on employment cycle interviewing and had participated in a role playing interview with a class member in which they played the role of an interviewer and an interviewee.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between interviewee interpersonal communication competency, communication flexibility, and rhetorical sensitivity, and communication performance in the selection interview?
2. What is the relationship between interviewee interpersonal communication competence, communication flexibility, and rhetorical sensitivity and evaluation of whether the interviewee should be hired for the job?
3. Will there be differences between gender groups in rating the items on the interpersonal communication competence measure, communication flexibility measure, and rhetorical sensitivity measure?
4. Will there be differences between age groups in rating the items on the interpersonal competences measure, communication flexibility measure, and rhetorical sensitivity measure?
5. Will there be differences between class groups in rating the items on the interpersonal competence measure, communication flexibility measure, and rhetorical sensitivity measure?

METHODS

Subjects

Participants in the study were 78 students enrolled in one of four sections of an upper-division undergraduate interviewing course at a large Midwestern University. The demographic make up of the composite group was as follows: (Gender=34 females and 44 males; Age=52 students under 30 and 26 students 30 or older, Type=41 day students and 37 extension students).

Interviewers

Four students, 3 undergraduate and 1 graduate student, 2 males and 2 females who had previously completed courses in informational interviewing and in survey research. The four interviewers received 5 hours of training to conduct selection interviews. All interviewee were asked the following five questions:

1. Tell me about you job experience.
2. What is your greatest strength?
3. What is your greatest weakness?
4. Tell me about your schooling.
5. Why are you interested in working for this company?

These questions were taken from a list of questions designed to destroy you in the employment interview (Gootnick, 1978).

Procedures

Three self-report measures were used in this study (see Appendix A). First, interpersonal communicative competence was measured using Spano's version (1995) of Wiemann's (1977) communication competence instrument. Interpersonal competence is a performance-based concept instrument. Other researchers have found it to be a reliable and valid measure (Hazleton & Cupach, 1986).

Second, communication flexibility was measured by using Spano's (1992) 25-item self-report instrument. The first version of the instrument contained 35 flexibility items and 15-marker items. Nineteen items were retained and 13 more research generated items were included in a second study. The results indicate that 25 items constitute the final version of the flexibility scale. The reliability coefficient was .86. Coefficient alpha reliability for the measure was .75 in the 1995 study.

Third, rhetorical sensitivity was measured by using Eadie and Powell (1991) revised version of Hart et al. (1980) RHETSEN instrument. The revised instrument was designed to build a measure of three communication orientations, rhetorical sensitivity (RS), noble self (NS), and rhetorical reflector (RR). Each would prove to be of equal validity. Principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation yielded a rhetorical sensitivity factor that accounted for 16% of the total variance and contained 10-items. Coefficient alpha reliabilities for the final instrument were as follows: RS=.84, NS=.74, and RR=.79. In this interviewing study the

researcher was only interested in attitudes directly related to competence; thus, NS and RR items were excluded.

In addition to these measurements two context-dependent measures were used to assess interviewees" communication performance and to determine their hireability for the position. The Selection Interviewee Evaluation Report (SER), developed by Stewart and Cash (1994, 156) was used to assess the communication variables. The instrument was developed by reviewing literature. After each interview the interviewer rated the interviewee on SER and indicated if he or she would hire the interviewee by rating on a five-point scale. Inter-rater reliability was part of the training for the interviewers. A standard resume was used. Each interview last approximately 10 minutes.

Interview

A standard job description was used and all students were assumed to be equally qualified for the position.

Statistical Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to determine the relationships between all interval variables. Point Biserial Correlation were competed to determine the relationships between hireability and dependent measures. Analysis of variance were completed to determine differences between gender groups, age groups, and type groups on dependent measures except hireability. For this variable chi square analyses were completed.

Results

The correlational analyses reveal that significant relationships exist among all variables (see Table 1). An interpretation of the results will appear in the next section. The analysis of variance results indicate significant differences occurred between gender groups on communication flexibility variables ($p < .001$), judges rating of performance ($p < .05$).

Significant differences also occurred between age groups and in rating communication flexibility. No significant differences occurred between type groups on communication competence variables. There were, however, significant differences between gender groups and class groups in the performance ratings of judges and teacher. Post hoc analysis did not yield any interaction effect, but wide mean differences existed on communication flexibility scores between males under 30 and males 30 and over ($X= 62.45$ under 30; $X=82.75$ 30 or over). The Scheffe procedure indicates that significant differences occurred between male 30 and under and female 30 and under ($p < .05$), between male 30 and over and female under 30, and between male 30 and over and female 30 and over ($p < .001$). These findings will be discussed in the next section.

Discussion

The results indicate that significant relationships exist between rhetorical sensitivity and all other variables. An examination of the results shows that respondents with higher (RS) scores had lower

communication flexibility (CF) score as well as lower communication competence scores (CC), were rated more positively by the interviewer and the teacher and were more likely to be hired. The findings show that a high RS person perceives himself/herself to be more flexible (CS) and to be displays more competence (CC). In addition, both the interviewer and the teacher rated the person high on their performance during the interview. Overall the results show that the person would be hired more often than someone with opposite scores. The conclusions are reinforced by the other relationships($X=9.66$; $P < .05$).

Other results indicate that males are less sensitive, more inflexible and more incompetent that females. Females were rated significantly higher by their interviewers and their teacher. Chi square analysis also indicates that females are more likely to be hired than males.

The age results reveal that the Under 30 group have higher RS scores, lower CF scores and lower CC scores and were rated more positively by their interviewers and teacher. The chi square results indicated they are more likely to be hired ($X= 11.67$; $p < .05$).

The type group results show that extension students have higher RS scores, lower CF scores, lower CC scores, and higher performance scores. This indicates that extension students are rhetorically sensitive, more flexible, and perceive greater communication competence, as well as being rated more positively by their interviewer.

Although these results seem logical, Spano and Zimmerman (1995) points out that competence traits used in his study are not the only ones relevant to the interview context. He suggested that cognitive complexity(Delia, Clark, & Switzer, 1974) and communication adaptability (Duran) might be more appropriate predictors. Their research ideas should be explored in future interviewing investigations

Table 1
Correlation Matrix of Dispositional Competence Variables and Situation Interview Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
Rhetorical Sensitivity		-.57	-.54	.41	.23
Flexibility			.54	-.83	-.68
Interpersonal Competence				-.43	-.31
Hireability					.85
Performance					

r=.30; P < .005

r=23; p < .025

Table 2
ANOVA between Gender Group on Dispositional Competence Variables And Situated Interview Variables

Gender	DV	Mean	F	P
Male	36.07	Rhetorical Sensitivity	.45	.37
Female	37.47			
Male	66.81	Comm. Flexibility	8.945	.001
Female	56.58			
Male	13.76	Comm. Competency	1.315	.10
Female	14.95			
Male	19.23	Performance	10.34	.001
Female	21.26			

Table 3
ANOVAs between Age Groups on Dispositional Competence Variables and Situated Interview Variables

Age	DV	Mean	F	P
Under 30	Rhetorical Sensitivity	37.42	1.609	.10
30 or over		34.2		
Under 30	Comm. Flexibility	58.92	8.215	.001
30 or over		70.50		
Under 30	Comm. Competence	14.19	.81	.37
30 or over		15.3		
Under 30	Performance	20.84	1.604	.10
30 or over		19.6		

Table 4
ANOVAs between Class Groups on Dispositional Competence Variables and Situated Interview Variables

Type	DV	Mean	F	P
Day	Rhetorical Sensitivity	36.26	.146	.70
Extension		34.8		
Day	Comm. Flexibility	62.4	.012	.91
Extension		61.95		
Day	Comm. Competence	15.26	1.404	.10
Extension		13.95		
Day	Performance	19.26	6.336	.001
Extension		21.38		

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INSTRUCTIONS: For each of the following items, please indicate the degree to which the item represents you typical attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors by filling in the space on your answer sheet that corresponds to the appropriate response. Indicate your response by selecting one of the the five points.

A B C D E
YES! |----------|----------|----------|----------| NO!

1. .___ Others have told me that I communicate well with difficult people.

2. .___ In an argument, I can usually get my point across without hunting my relationship with the other person.

3. ____ As a child I communicated easily with adults.

4. ____ I'm good at figuring out the meanings behind what others say.

5. ____ I value my ability to face various communication situations.

6. ____ In group situations, I usually offer my opinions about the topic of discussion.

7. ____ I have been told that I am able to give criticism in a way that does not hurt others.

8. ____ I can usually disagree with someone without damaging our relationship.

9. ____ Most of the conflicts I have with others are resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

10. .___ More than a few times I've been told that I communicate well in difficult situations.

INSTRUCTIONS: Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following items. 1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3=undecided, 4= disagree, and 5=strongly disagree. Please a number in the space to the left of each item.

1. ____I would find it difficult to talk about a subject that I know little about.
2. ____I often ask questions in an attempt to learn about others attitudes and feelings.
3. ____I generally know what other people expect of me in any given situation.
4. ____I would find it uncomfortable to tell another person about my personal problems.
5. ____ I believe that I would make a good diplomat because I am a tactful person.
6. ____I would enjoy giving a speech to an audience that I do not know.
7. ____I often smile when communicating with others to show my interest.
8. ____I find it difficult to make people who are nervous feel more at ease.

9. ____I believe there are a variety of ways to express any one idea.
10. ____I am fearful of situations where the rules and norms are unfamiliar.
11. ____I would find it uncomfortable if another person told me about their personal problems.
12. ____In some situations I find it difficult to determine the appropriate way to act.
13. ____I enjoy meeting and talking with a variety of people.
14. ____I can communicate effectively on a variety of subjects.
15. ____I do not always know how to respond to the criticisms of others.
16. ____I am not very good at instigating change in my relationships.
17. ____I would find it enjoyable to communicate with a person whose values and attitudes differed greatly from my own.
18. ____ often find it difficult to find the right words to express my thoughts and feelings.
19. ____I am effective when interacting with children.
20. ___I have the ability to change my communication behavior to fit the situation.
21. ____I tend to look at other people when communicating to show my interest.
22. ____I am often aware of the various communication alternatives available in any given situation.
23. ____It is difficult for me to initiate conversations, especially with people that I do not know very well.
24. ____I enjoy experimenting with different ways of interacting with others.
25. ____Other people often come to me for advice about their problems.

INSTRUCTIONS: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=uncertain, 4=disagree, and 5=Strongly disagree

1. ____ I find it easy to get along with others.
2. ____ I can adapt to changing situations.
3. ____ I treat people as individuals.
4. ____ It is rewarding to talk to others.
5. ____ I can deal with others effectively.
6. ____ I am a good listener.
7. ____ It is easy to talk to others.
8. ____ I won't argue with others just to prove I'm right.
9. ____ I ignore other people's feelings.
10. ____ I generally know how others feel.
11. ____ I let others know I understand them.
12. ____ I understand other people.
13. ____ I prefer to let other people talk.
14. ____ I like to be close and personal with people.
15. ____ I generally know what type of behavior is appropriate in any given situation.
16. ____ I usually do not make unusual demands on my friends.
17. ____ I am supportive of others.
18. ____ I can easily put myself in another person's shoes.
19. ____ I am a likeable person.
20. ____ I am flexible.
21. ____ People can come to me with their problems.
22. ____ I generally say the right thing at the right time.
23. ____ I like to use my voice and body expressively.
24. ____ I am sensitive to others' needs of the moment.
25. ____ I am relaxed and comfortable when speaking.
26. ____ I like meeting strangers.
27. ____ I generally relax when conversing with a new acquaintance.
28. ____ I enjoy social gathering when I can meet new people.
29. ____ I am not afraid to speak with people in authority.

Name:_____